

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Transformative Learning: Peripheral or Fundamental in Higher Ed Theory?

Kandlbinder and Peseta (2009) asked faculty and administrators for postgraduate certification courses in higher education teaching and learning what they consider to be the key concepts practitioners need to know about teaching well in college. In other words, if you want to earn a postgraduate certificate in higher education teaching and learning, what is the essential knowledge of the field as characterized by those in postgraduate credentialing?

First, though, is “higher education teaching and learning” even a “field”?

Yes. It has a history, an organizing body of knowledge, experts who have risen to that status based on research and general agreement about the quality and impact of their research, peer-reviewed journals with stout impact factors, conferences at which theorists and practitioners gather to exchange information about the latest lines of inquiry and research, awards given to outstanding exemplars, grants won from government and private funding sources, and so on.

In short, by any measure, “teaching and learning in college” is a discipline. As such, key concepts in the discipline “can be seen as a reductive description of [the] field’s distinctive theoretical knowledge” (Kandlbinder & Peseta, p. 20).

In examining results from a survey consisting of four open-ended questions administered via email to 147 course coordinators of postgraduate certificates in higher education teaching and learning in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, Kandlbinder and Peseta also considered the authors and readings the coordinators said were associated with the concepts. Readers coded the open-ended responses independently, comparing results to check for consistency and resolving differences and, in some cases, requesting additional information from respondents in order to determine the most accurate classifications.

What the researchers found among the responses received (31% response rate) sorted into a list of 32 concepts that had at least two mentions as being important to the field. The top five concepts named were:

- 1 Reflective practice (24 responses)
- 2 Constructive alignment (20)
- 3 Student approaches to learning (14)
- 4 Scholarship of teaching (11)
- 5 Assessment-driven learning (10)

Of the top five, the clear top two are hallmarks of Transformative Learning (TL). Schön’s *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) lays out the key ideas of reflective practice as characterized by Australasian/U.K. respondents, but Stephen Brookfield’s ideas in

Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher (1995) also define this concept. Both authors agree that

. . . the distinctive feature of critical reflection is the identification of taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions. These assumptions frame how we think and act as teachers, and unless we develop the habit of questioning our assumptions, we are likely to make poor decisions. (Kandlbinder & Peseta, p. 24)

Wide agreement among those who teach about higher education teaching and learning seems to indicate that *teaching students to be* reflective about their learning is critically important in college teaching and that *reflective thinking about one's own teaching* is a requisite *among* college teachers.

In other words, we must teach our students how to be reflective thinkers, and we must model that practice in ourselves as exemplars for our students. Taking such action is a powerful way to teach transformatively.

Mezirow's definition of the TL process, after all, includes critical reflection as a requisite component (1990).

"Constructive alignment" is closely akin to constructivism in teaching practice. In such an approach to teaching, all aspects of instructional design and student activity help students cognitively "ladder up" to higher-level understandings, with faculty providing a scaffolding structure students can use to put together new understandings based on an integration of prior knowledge.

Constructive alignment is a very integrative way to approach course design. One excellent description of rationales and practices that characterize this method of helping students learn is found in Dee Fink's *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses* (2013). Dee is a good friend to UCO and regular workshopper here whose work illustrates in multiple ways the necessity for alignment of course design with outcomes and activities working together in an integrated fashion as effective means to help enable student transformation.

"Reflective practice" and "constructive alignment" aren't just hallmarks of Transformative Learning. As Kandlbinder and Peseta's research indicates, they are also key concepts about good teaching and learning in college in general. To see a linchpin component in TL — reflective practice — as the top-rated concept in understanding successful higher education teaching and learning reinforces the wisdom in taking a TL approach in our classes as college faculty.

References

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